

'Torch Song' looks at subject of homosexuality

RECENT RELEASES:

On the assumption that you haven't had time to screen last week's eight new movies, the distributors only released two films this week: "Torch Song Trilogy" and "Full Moon in Blue Water," starring the ever-popular Gene Hackman, currently appearing in "Mississippi Burning."

Hackman shares with Michael Caine the distinction of "busiest actor in town." In recent years, each has appeared in six or more films. In an industry where they soon forget your name on the marquee is the name of the game.

At press time, no screenings had been scheduled for "Full Moon in Blue Water" but it is described as an R-rated comedy about the complicated relationships of four people whose lives revolve around the Blue Water Grill. Can it be "Mystic Pizza" with guys?

In addition to Hackman, the film stars Teri Garr, Burgess Meredith and Elias Koteas.

"Torch Song Trilogy," (B) (R) 112 minutes, has received wide coverage in the press. In case you haven't been reading the entertainment section, this is Harvey Fierstein's sensitive discussion of homosexuality in our society.

Based on his award-winning Broadway play, Fierstein wrote the screenplay and stars as Arnold Beckett, a homosexual who believes closets are for clothes as he deals openly with his sexual preferences.

Matthew Broderick's appearance in the New York production led to his successful career in films. This time he plays Alan, a successful model who becomes Arnold's lover. There's also Arnold's bisexual lover, Ed (Brian Kerwin).

As for family, only Arnold's mother (Anne Bancroft) makes any impact — father and brother are just there. Ed's wife, Laurel (Karen Young) has some influence.

Arnold does well as a female impersonator and the film's best moments are musical sequences in the club where he works as Virginia Ham, a singer of the blues, those torch songs of the title.

Marvelous faces people this show of female impersonators, particularly the fat face of the "mistress" of ceremonies. The complete naturalism of these scenes is compelling and the genuine and touching of the film's open attitude toward homosexuality.

With this unaffected naturalism, the club scenes rock of "Cabaret" and the decadence of German Expressionism in the '20s, save one thing. Smoke and dim lights notwithstanding, it's all too slick, too clean and neat, as are the back rooms where the boys go for a quickie.

Selders do film characters look at the camera; that breaks the illusion of realism upon which film depends.



Grading the movies

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| A+ | Top marks—sure to please |
| A | Close behind—excellent |
| A- | Still in running for top honors |
| B+ | Pretty good stuff, not perfect |
| B | Good |
| B- | Good but notable deficiencies |
| C+ | Just a cut above average |
| C | Mediocre |
| C- | Not so hot and slipping fast |
| D+ | The very best of the poor stuff |
| D | Poor |
| D- | It doesn't get much worse |
| F | Truly awful |
| Z | Reserved for the colossal bad |
| * No advanced screening | |

But twice in "Torch Song Trilogy," Fierstein turns to the camera and speaks directly to us. In particular, the opening monologue in his dressing room effectively and lovingly describes the plight of homosexuals in a heterosexual world that is, at best, only tolerant.

Besides the unnaturally tidy scenes of domestic life, the film has several other jarring inconsistencies. Notably Arnold and Alan's choice of neighborhood after receiving approval to adopt a young boy.

While my legal expertise doesn't cover such matters, I'll assume that homosexuals are allowed to adopt homosexual boys, despite the lack of any explanation in the film. Certainly, the apartment to which they move seems out of place for the neighborhood. But, then, that's New York.

"Torch Song Trilogy" presents itself as a plea for acceptance of homosexuals. It's done well enough — at least until the last half hour — so that it stands as an appeal for tolerance for all outsiders. However, the film's basic premise breaks down under careful scrutiny and the 30-minute drag and begin to grate on the viewer.

The assumption of "Torch Song Trilogy" is that homosexuality is natural and society is at fault for not accepting it. No generative force for Arnold's homosexuality is presented, just his several statements that he always knew — plus a gratuitous



Arnold (Harvey Fierstein) and Alan (Matthew Broderick) share a quiet breakfast in a scene from "Torch Song Trilogy" from New Line Cinema.

opening scene where Ma discovers the "Young Arnold" (Benji Schulman) in drag.

Her face quickly registers surprise, understanding and acceptance. That, taken with the film's refusal to present causation for Arnold's homosexuality — in fact, there's considerable testimony that the family scene couldn't have been better — and Arnold's constant plea for openness and acceptance, leaves the clear indication that society is wrong for discriminating against a natural inclination.

My clinical standing is even lower than my legal, but it seems to me that there's a problem with that assumption. While society has an obligation to guarantee the rights of all members — no matter how they choose to deviate from the norm, providing they don't harm others — that doesn't mean that everything is within the natural order of things.

Style reinforces concept and one way "Torch Song" proves that society is at fault for not accepting homosexuality is the curious way in which Anne Bancroft and Harvey Fierstein sound so much alike.

That similarity may be appropriate for mother and child, despite the

gulf that separates them. But Bancroft's performance is forced and harsh, almost a caricature of the New York Jewish mother, despite testimony to a fine family life. The vocal similarity just doesn't work and becomes irritating.

Hidden in Bancroft's performance is a split personality who either is or isn't responsible for her son. You can't have it both ways, and the film gets murky when Bancroft becomes the villain for not accepting Arnold as he is.

With the two of them yelling at each other with roughly the same vocal qualities, it ruffs harshly on the sensibilities and approximates being forced to watch what goes on in other people's bathrooms.

The message we get from all this is mixed. The film makes a profound plea for tolerance of those who do not meet the norm. That and its fine music, fast-paced editing, upbeat style in the bed, "Penthouse" is to its credit.

However, the premise that homosexuality is normal is a little hard to take. Given problems in the last 30 minutes, "Torch Song Trilogy" probably will only play well to sophisticated, big-city audiences and the

coverage it's been receiving won't be matched at the box office.

STILL PLAYING:

"The Accidental Tourist" (C+) (PG) 120 minutes.

Slow-paced family melodrama.

"The Accused" (C+) (PG) 120 minutes.

Long, slow but poignant drama about mislabeled rape cases.

"Beaches" (A+) (PG-13) 120 minutes.

Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey in fine show of friendship.

"Child's Play" (B-) (R). Horror story about possessed doll given as birthday present.

"Crossing Delancey" (A) (PG) 95 minutes.

A liberated young New York gal, but grandma's got old world ideas.

"Dangerous Liaisons" (C+) (R) 115 minutes.

Even lush images and good acting can't overcome the neo-cinematic quality of this boring story of pre-Revolutionary French decadence.

"Dragnet '82" (A) (R).

Underwater aliens.

"Dirty Harry Soundtrack" (B+) (PG) 100 minutes.

Super-slick cut men can be Rivera are lots of fun.

"Gleaming the Cube" (C) (PG-13).

State-of-the-art.

"Hellbound — Hellraiser" (R). A cast of unknowns in torment and terror.

"I'm Gonna Get You Socks" (C+) (R) 95 minutes.

Slow-paced satire of B-movies from the Black point of view.

"The January Man" (B) (R) 95 minutes.

Clichéd but slick detective story with big-name cast.

"Lair of the White Worm" (R). Ken Russell's out there with the archeologists uncovering a strange skull with a bizarre past.

"Land Before Time" (A) (G) 75 minutes.

Touching story of a group of young dinosaurs. Excellent animation.

"Mississippi Burning" (A+) (R) 130 minutes.

Brilliant political film about human greed, fear and cruelty. A must see.

"My Stepmother is an Alien" (B+) (PG-13) 108 minutes.

When extra-terrestrial Kim Basinger touches down, this comedy takes off.

"Naked Gun" (D) (PG-13) 90 minutes.

Overly broad farce never gets off the ground from the police academy room.

"Oliver and Company" (A) (G) 70 minutes.

Disney animation at its best.

"Raiders of the Lost Ark" (A+) (R) 130 minutes.

Tom Cruise and Kevin Costner star as brothers in every sense.

"Scrooged" (B+) (PG-13) 90 minutes.

Updated romp through Dickens' "Christmas Carol."

"Talk Radio" (B) (R) 110 minutes.

Talk-show host keeps his listeners' attention by offending and attacking their beliefs.

"Tequila Sunrise" (A+) (PG-13) 115 minutes.

Slick, glib production gets lost trying for high-concept, high-tech look in an old-fashioned, hard-boiled detective.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWING

August balances good, grim in 'Pelle'

By Ann Sharp
special writer

"Pelle the Conqueror," a Danish film by director Bille August, is a quiet sort of masterpiece. Nothing about it. All its exquisite, craftsmanlike elements of acting, scripting, cinematography blend unobtrusively into an engrossing piece of storytelling.

The story it tells is one that seems increasingly popular with filmmakers in recent years. Like "Pikote" and "Salaam Bombay," it's a coming-of-age drama about a child who

isn't permitted much of a childhood, because he is poor and must fend for himself in a cruel, unfeeling world.

"PELLE" is taken from a series of novels, written by Danish author Martin Andersen Nexø at the turn of the century. It's about a young Swede who rises from humble beginnings to become a powerful labor leader. From the time Pelle is born, his father is a radical.

The film opens with Pelle, about 10 years old, arriving with his elderly father in Denmark. The father as-

pires Pelle that they've come to a wonderful place where there's plenty of good things to eat and drink and children can just play all day.

It soon becomes apparent that Pelle's father doesn't know what he's talking about. Within a few hours, these two hapless, hungry immigrants have signed on at a Stone Farm, a horrid sort of slave labor camp where both children and parents work like dogs, and the only nice thing to eat is the fruit of the strawberry plant Pelle's father brought over from Sweden.

"A Winter Tan" (1988). Controversial film, based on a true story, about a New York intellectual whose "vacation for feminism" takes her on a sexual tour of Mexico.

STONE FARM is presided over by the most vile, revolting agricultural capitalist ever dreamt up by a Marxist novelist. Kongstrup, what a monster's name! — is a creature so unrelentingly greedy and vicious that his evil aura permeates every aspect of the farm.

Handsome, decent, gentle young Pelle is his antithesis. He will not be crushed by Stone Farm's brutality; equally, he refuses to use his strength to become an oppressor himself.

In Pelle's world, there is no room for innocence, only ignorance. Pelle

is spared nothing. He is mentally and physically abused and forced to witness unspeakably ugly, violent events. Because his cowardly, weak-willed father isn't up to the job, he must be his own parent.

IN LESS skillful hands, "Pelle" might have been an unbearably depressing film. But August finds the right balance between the grim aspects of Pelle's life and his happier, more hopeful ones.

There is much wisdom here and a quiet sort of humor. August presents the story's often tragic and horrific occurrences in an admirably low-key manner, making them comprehensible rather than shocking.

Max von Sydow is so often typecast as a stoic pillar of Nordic machismo. It's delightful to see how convincing he is as Pelle's kindly, but sadly simple-minded father.

As von Sydow plays him, he makes you wonder how poor Pelle has survived so long under his care. Nevertheless, the genuine love he conveys for the boy, a role well acted by Pelle Hvenegaard, is evidently the very thing that enables Pelle not only to survive, but to conquer.

Good news, international film fans. The Fort Theatre in Windsor has tentative plans to reopen Feb. 1. Call (519) 971-9993 for details.

SCREEN SCENE

AFTERNOON FILM THEATRE, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. Call 833-2730 for information.

"The White Hell of Pitz Palu" (1929). 1 p.m. Jan. 24-25. Drama about a perilous mountain climbing expedition. Directed by Arnold Fanck, with Leni Riefenstahl and Gustav Diesel.

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p.m. Jan. 28. Errol Morris' stunning documentary about a man unjustly convicted of murder is like a "60 Minutes" episode made in heaven.

"Polyester" (1981). 9 p.m. Jan. 23. The morally ambiguous John Waters' first film for halfway nice people, this is the tender tale of Francine, a Baltimore housewife more stoned against than sinning.

"The Moderns" (1988). 9 p.m. Jan. 25. Satirical tale about love among the artists, set in Paris during the 1920s. Directed by Alan Rodolph, with Keith Carradine.

"The Barefoot Contessa" (1944). 7 p.m. Jan. 26. Heartbreak and glamour mingle in this story of a poor girl who achieves Hollywood stardom, but can't find happiness. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, with Humphrey Bogart and Ava Gardner.

"Metropolis" (1926). 8:30 p.m. Jan. 29. Fritz Lang's silent science fiction classic about a sinister totalitarian state ruled by an evil genius. This showing will feature a live performance of music originally written to accompany the film, performed by organist John Lauter.

"Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam" (1985). 8:30 p.m. Jan. 29. Robert DeNiro, Michael J. Fox and Sean Penn are among the actors who narrate this film, which juxtaposes images of the Vietnam War with actual letters from American servicemen.

TELE-ARTS, 1540 Woodward, Detroit. Call 863-3318 for dates and times.

"The Wash" (1988). Michael Toshiyuki Uno's first feature, about a 65-year-old woman who finds love after leaving her ungrateful crab of a husband. Tries to be a bitter-sweet slice of Asian-American life in a "Dim Sum" or "Living on Tokyo Time," but doesn't quite do it.

"A Winter Tan" (1988). Controversial film, based on a true story, about a New York intellectual whose "vacation for feminism" takes her on a sexual tour of Mexico.

"The Cocoon" (1985). Cinema Guild, 7 p.m. Jan. 27, Angell Hall, with "Penthouse" (1933) at 8:45 p.m. and "International House" (1933) at 10:30 p.m.

"The Last Detail" (1973). Mediatrice, 7 p.m. Jan. 27, Modern Language Building, with "Five Easy Pieces" (1970) at 9 p.m.

"Detail," arguably Hal Ashby's best, concerns the sad, funny adventures of two Navy lifers (Jack Nicholson and Otis Young) escorting a young sailor (Randy Quaid) to the brig. "Penthouse" also with Nicholson, is Bob Fosse's counter-culture saga of a classical pianist turned blues collar worker.

"Bliss" (1988). Ann Arbor Film Co-op, 7, 8:45 and 10:30 p.m. Jan. 27, Modern Language Building. Acclaimed puppet

animator Jan Svankmajer's first feature is a surrealist adaptation of Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass."

"Rebecca" (1940). Hill Street Cinema, 1419 Hill St., 7:15 and 9:30 p.m. Jan. 28. Alfred Hitchcock's tinsy gothic thriller, based on a Daphne DuMaurier novel, about an innocent young woman tormented by the ghost of her husband's first wife.

"Spellbound" (1945). Cinema Guild, 7 p.m. Jan. 28, Angell Hall, with "Strangers on a Train" (1951) and 9 p.m. Freed would gag at the way Hitchcock mimicked his theories in the psychological thriller "Spellbound," but it's worth seeing for its famous Salvador Dalí dream sequence.

Raymond Chandler wrote the screenplay for "Strangers," another Hitch classic, starring Robert Walker and Farley Granger.

"Betty Blue" (1986). Ann Arbor Film Co-op, 7 and 8:15 p.m. Jan. 23, Modern Language Building. Unpleasant, but intriguing French semi-porn about a would-be writer's love affair with a psychotic young woman. Directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix.

"All the King's Men" (1949). Mediatrice, 8 p.m. Jan. 23, Modern Language Building, with "Meet John Doe" (1941) at 9 p.m.

"Men" is Robert Rossen's Oscar-winning adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's novel about a power-mad Southern senator. "John Doe" is Frank Capra's story of an average Joe (Gary Cooper) cynically exploited by a newspaper publicity campaign.

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